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Classical Echoes from the South

Particularly informative about life in the South during the Civil War are the diaries, journals, and personal recollections of the period. Written by eye-witnesses in the field or at home, they furnish sometimes valuable correctives to more formal accounts. But they offer, too, intriguing glimpses of another day's acquaintance with things classical, manifesting itself even while the tide of battle swirled over Gettysburg and the Wilderness, and life in Southern cities grew increasingly grim.[1]

Classical studies, of course, had been emphasized from ante-bellum days in Southern academies and colleges.[2] Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve, it may be recalled, began in 1856 a twenty-year professorship of Greek at the University of Virginia, where Greek and Latin held the lead in the course of study. Unlike their Northern fellows, perhaps, students who labored over Greek and Latin may have gained inspiration for nothing more creative than oratory, the Old South's "most flourishing literary art."[3] But it seems clear that the quality of higher education in the South was not inferior to that of the North,[4] despite the fact that numbers of students did *go north to college*.[5] Students had equal opportunity in Southern schools as far as classical studies went.[6] What some remembered of them, diaries and the like reveal.

Verse Bits

General Wade Hampton, eventually successor to the colorful Jeb Stuart, while convalescing from wounds could call to mind his Horace—or is it Martial? Seated in church behind a girl wearing earrings in the form of golden ladders, he "perpetrated the following impromptu," according to a diarist:[7]

> Lydia swears her prudish ear
> No word of love shall ever reach.
> *Then tell, I* pray, why doth she wear
> *What* does another lesson teach?
> A sign that's plain to every eye
> She's not as deaf as any adder;
> And he who hopes to climb so high
> Has but to use a golden ladder.

And on the subject of verse-making, it may be added that a quatrain or Southern "propaganda" invoked so unexpected a thing as a Latin Dictionary for effectiveness. John R. Thompson, poet and editor of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, commented thus on the "distortion of slavery" in *Uncle Tom's Cabin:*

> When Latin I studied, my Ainsworth[8] in hand,
> I answered my teacher that *sto* meant to stand.
> But if asked I should now give another reply,
> For Stowe means, beyond any cavil, a lie.[9]

Few of those who recorded day-to-day events of the war match in wit or felicity of expression Mrs. Mary Boykin Chestnut, close friend of Mrs. Jefferson Davis.[10] Her *Diary from Dixie*, an altogether fascinating book, reflects wide reading even during the war, and although Mrs. Chestnut does not so indicate, volumes on classical subjects must have passed under her sharp eyes. She turns to Greece and Rome as she confides to her page the South's determined will to persevere:

Encouragement from Classical Times

To my small wits, whenever people were persistent, united, and rose in their might, no general, however great, succeeded in subjugating them. Have we not swamps, forests, rivers, mountains—every natural barrier? The Carthaginians begged for peace because they were a luxurious people and could not endure the hardship of war, though the enemy suffered as sharply as they did.[11]

We do not need to be fired by drink to be brave. My classical lore is small indeed, but I faintly remember something of the Spartans, who marched to the music of lutes. No drum and fife was needed to *fillip their fainting spirits. In that, we* think we are Spartans.[12]

Mrs. Chestnut records a friend's defense of Lee's policy of entrenchment before Richmond:

As a soldier, Lee is as much above suspicion as Caesar required his wife to be. If I remember Caesar's *Commentaries*,

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he owns up to a lot of entrenching. You let Mars' Robert alone; he knows what he is about.[13]

And one reads there of General John S. Preston heartening friends with Darwin, Herodotus, and Livy, and of ladies at a social gathering discussing plagiarism in a framework of the Nausicaa episode of the *Odyssea*.

Other Feminine Contributors

Like Mrs. Chestnut prominent in the social life of Richmond, vivacious Constance Cary in a volume of *Recollections* analyzes classically the capital scene after the battle of Yellow Tavern: "In all our parties and pleasurings, there seemed to lurk a foreshadowing of tragedy, as in the Greek plays where the gloomy end is ever kept in sight."[14]

Another lady war-diarist, Eliza Frances Andrews, watching paroled Confederates march westward through Georgia, confesses: "I am in such a state of excitement that I can do nothing but spend my time, like the Athenians of old, in either hearing or telling some new thing."[15]

A similar scene in Alabama calls forth this comment from a lady observing it: "Though not coming rejoicing, as did the Athenians and Spartans from the battle of Plataea, they were just as dear to the hearts of their kindred at their ruined homes, as if they had come marching in triumph, with olive-wreaths encircling their brows."[16]

Journals of Warriors

Journals of the combatants also yield here and there interesting details. Major Henry Kyd Douglas of Stonewall Jackson's staff notes for April 2, 1863: "I spent a good part of the night in my tent reading Horace. . . ."[17] In three years of campaigning he managed, incidentally, to read some three hundred books.

The same officer, wondering how his troops will retire from Harper's Ferry, reflects with Vergil, *facilis descensus Averno*. . . .[18] He dots his journal casually with the names Briareus, Bucephalus, Achates, Hero and Leander, Xerxes; with the phrases "Parthian shots," "Trojan gifts," "Stygian darkness," and Ovid's *in medio tutissimus ibis*. And when Jackson stops in a particularly exposed place to pick blackberries, Douglas recalls: "I think I mentioned classically that it was at just such a place that Proserpine, picking flowers or berries of some kind, was 'mined.' He did not seem to take in the veiled suggestion."[19]

Lieutenant L. D. Young, in the midst of planning Confederate strategy, reminisced classically: "We thought of Leonidas and his Spartans and hoped for an opportunity to imitate and if possible to eclipse that immortal event at Thermopylae. But not so the wily Sherman. That 'old fox' was too cunning to be caught."[20]

Major Robert Stiles

Robert Stiles, Major of Artillery in the army of Northern Virginia, recalls comrades in lighter moments burying a tame crow, dignifying the occasion "not only by salvos of artillery, but also by an English speech, a Latin oration, and a Greek ode, which would have done honor to any literary or memorial occasion at old Yale."[21] Of Richmond in 1862 he writes:

> In the second Punic War, when Hannibal was investing Rome, the tribune Oppius had a law enacted forbidding women to wear colors during the public distress. But in our great conflict no such enactment was necessary for the devoted women of our seven-hilled city; dark death had entered every home and his sombre garb was everywhere.[22]

General McLaws to Stiles was a type of "the Roman centurion—say that centurion who stood at his post in Herculaneum until the lava ran over him."[23] Missing the battle of Antietam, the Major laments in Vergilian words: "I am not able to say *quorum pars fui*."[24]

I have seen but a few of the journals and diaries from the Civil War period. The Athenaeum in Boston, it may be noted, has been engaged in the process of listing them. But those that have come my way lead me to suspect in others unseen, agreeable reminders of a classical yesterday.

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NOTES

1 It is interesting to know that when, during the war, textbooks could no longer be "imported" from the North, publishers in the Confederate States "brought out new editions of Latin works," and that William Bingham (1835-1873) "wrote his well-known Latin Grammar at this time"; see E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America* (Baton Rouge 1950) 518. 2 See Charles S. Sydnor, *The Development of Southern Sectionalism* (Baton Rouge 1948) 58, 67. 3 See Francis B. Simkins, *The South, Old and New* (New York 1947) 98. 4 An editorial in *The Richmond Enquirer* (December 29, 1855) maintained: "As institutions of learning, the colleges of the South are equal to those of the North—the University of Virginia probably superior to any in the Union." 5 The practice was vigorously criticized in newspapers and periodicals; cf. Avery Craven, *The Coming of the Civil War* (New York 1942) 283, 292, and Sydnor, op. cit. (*supra*, note 2) 64, 303-304. 6 About 1848 a student at Amherst College and a student at South Carolina College (as their own contemporary accounts of school-life indicate) had pretty much the same scholastic experience; "Both boys struggled manfully through prodigious quantities of Latin and Greek" (George P. Schmidt "Colleges in Ferment," *The American Historical Review* 59 [1953] 25). 7 Mrs. Mary Boykin Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, edited by Ben Ames Williams (Boston 1949) 258. 8 Robert Ainsworth (1660-1743), English lexicographer, published a Latin Dictionary in 1736. Like most dictionaries, this was reprinted a number of times. 9 Quoted in Alfred H. Bill, *The Beleaguered City, Richmond 1861-1865* (New York 1946) 20-21. 10 Mrs. Chestnut (1823-1886) was the wife of James Chesnut, Jr., Senator from South Carolina before the war, later a Brigadier-General and aide to Jefferson Davis. 11 *Diary from Dixie* 204-205. 12 Ibid. 270. An interesting parallel is found in a letter from Captain C. M. Blackford to his wife in 1862: "How much is it possible for the men of a country to be subjugated when the women show so much spirit? It is said that Greece could not be conquered because its maidens twined their soft tresses into golden bowstrings that their lovers might send winged death to the Persian heart. . . . Neither history nor